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HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

Saturday, December 22, 1934.

(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

Subject: "News Notes from Washington." Items of interest to women, from the U. S. Department of Agriculture.

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Our special correspondent in Washington, D. C., has been attending the movies lately -- weather movies. She writes that she has just seen pictures of Government weather officials flying around in airplanes, getting first-hand information about the weather on the other side of the clouds.

"If you want to see a unique picture show," she writes, "I recommend a film entitled: 'Back of the Weather Forecast.' I saw it last night in the auditorium of the United States Department of Agriculture. As an 'extra added attraction,' Mr. W. R. Gregg made a talk. You know Mr. Gregg is Chief of the United States Weather Bureau; he's been with the Bureau for thirty years.

"And if you think," writes our correspondent, "that there is any guess-work in weather forecasting, you are sadly out of date. If you think that to make it rain, all you have to do is plan a picnic, you're mistaken."

. . . Well, I'm not so sure our Washington friend is right about that. Every time I plan a picnic it does rain. Could Gregg explain such a phenomenon?

Let's read on:

"Mr. Gregg told us that the weather forecaster no longer sits in a high tower, reading the signs in the sky through a telescope, and interpreting his observations with a lot of mysterious looking instruments. Nowadays the weather forecaster builds his forecasts from two daily sets of charts. These charts are prepared by skilled meteorologists, who use facts and figures provided by hundreds of trained observers and sent almost instantaneously over long distances.

"I wish you could see a set of these weather charts. Each set contains about five thousand figures, symbols, or lines, and every one of those five thousand figures and symbols and lines is the result of a separate calculation.

"Until just a few years ago, Mr. Gregg told us, we had no ship reports, no reports on weather in the upper atmosphere, no records of pressure and temperature changes every three hours. We have all these records now, and that's why modern forecasters can prepare accurate charts for aviators, for sailors, for farmers, for fruit growers who must know in advance when a frost is coming, for the general public.

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"Now," asks our Washington correspondent, "what would you guess is the batting average for weather forecasts? I'll tell you the answer. Very short forecasts are 90 to 95 percent accurate. Longer forecasts average 80 to 85 percent accurate. Here's another question the Chief of the Weather Bureau answered: Is the climate changing? Of course, all the old-timers assure us it is. They say that the snows of yesteryear were the heaviest ever known to man, the drifts the deepest, the temperatures the lowest, or the highest.

"The truth is this: The climate has been changing, from early geological times, but on such a vast scale, and so slowly -- that we cannot comprehend it. However, every generation thinks the climate is noticeably changing. Thomas Jefferson was quite sure of it; so was Benjamin Franklin.

"And," our Washington correspondent adds, "so are the members of that famous society, the Blizzard Men of 1888. I met some of these veterans in New York City, where they hold their annual meetings, and they told me wonderful tales of that memorable blizzard -- how the weather man, on March 12, 1888, predicted 'Fair and Warmer,' and how that day brought the worst blizzard ever known to man; a blizzard that completely paralyzed the city.

"Every year the members of the Blizzard Veterans' Association celebrate with a big dinner, and speeches by the graybeards who were caught in that stupendous storm of '88, and had to stay away from home for two or three days. Some of them admit they were kind of sorry when the sidewalks of New York got passable again, and they had no further excuse for staying in town, having a good sociable time in their clubs. The blizzard of '88 is the most thrilling experience in their lives, and they meet once a year -- to talk about the weather.

"Some people have wondered whether the drought of 1934 means a permanent change to desert-like conditions. There is nothing to indicate such a change, according to Mr. Gregg. He says great climatic changes have taken place in our country since geologic times; but certainly, within the past few years, there has been no marked permanent change in climate.

"The longest rainfall records in the Weather Bureau indicate that the 1934 drought is only what we may naturally expect to occur, at comparatively long intervals of thirty to forty years, notwithstanding the fact that the present drought is more severe, and covers larger areas, than any other drought on record. Incidentally, official weather records go back 65 years, and partial records as far back as 200 years.

"Some day," writes our Washington reporter, "I'm going to call on Mr. Gregg and find out more about the work of his important Bureau, which serves such a wide variety of interests -- agriculture, commerce, marine and aerial navigation. Wouldn't you like to know more about the River and Flood service, air navigation service, and so on?"

Indeed I would -- that sounds interesting. Every once in a while I read a warning to householders that there'll be a flood in a certain part of the country -- I suppose such warnings are all in the day's work, to a weather forecaster.

In conclusion, our Washington friend tells us a story of olden times, centuries ago, when the wealthy princes of India hired philosophers to forecast the weather. If any philosopher made even one mistake, he was forced to maintain silence for the rest of his lifetime. Can you imagine a penalty more severe?

Whether you're an East Indian or Chief of the Weather Bureau, according to Mr. Gregg, you have to be a philosopher to forecast the weather. "He ought to know," writes our friend, "for as I said before, he's been telling us 'Fair and Warmer' and 'Cloudy and Colder' for thirty years."

That's all of our letter from Washington, D. C. We want to hear more about this fascinating subject, the weather, some of these days. By the way, I hope the Chief of the Weather Bureau will send us nice Christmas weather -- with so many boys and girls home from school for the holidays, and so many annual gatherings -- we'll need it.

Next Monday I want to tell you about a few last-minute gifts. Goodbye, until then.

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